This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials related to the FRANCIS J. DEWES HOUSE, prepared for the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks by its staff.

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the Francis J. Dewes House

COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS

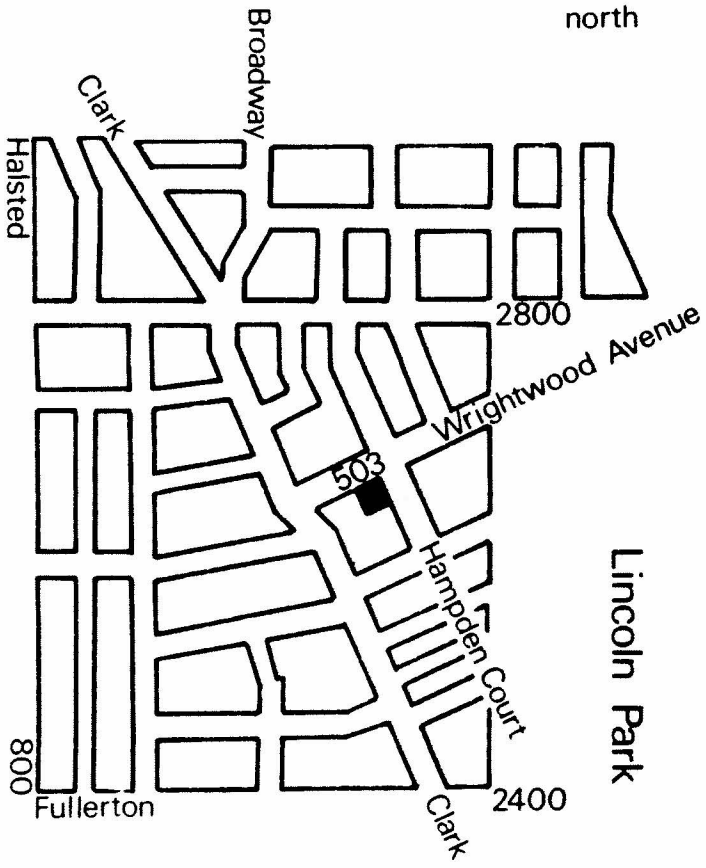
the
Francis J. Dewes House

503 Wrightwood Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Adolph Cudell and
Arthur Hercz architects

completed in 1896

The former home of Francis Dewes is tucked into a pleasant residential area near Lincoln Park on Chicago's north side. Dominating the southwest corner of Wrightwood Avenue and Hampden Court, its baroque-revival exterior provides a strong contrast to the modern apartment buildings which surround it.



The Dewes House was built from 1894 to 1896, just after the World's Columbian Exposition. Although the mid-1890s was still largely a period of retrospective architecture, it also was a time of architectural innovation. These were the years just prior to Frank Lloyd Wright's first independent commissions, when the Prairie School concept of simple, geometric shapes was being developed. But Francis Dewes' house is a monument to old-world splendor. It follows the building tradition set by such famous Chicago families as the Fields, the McCormicks, and the Ryersons.

Dewes was a self-made man of great wealth. He was born in Prussia in 1845, and was educated at the *Realschule* in Cologne. His family apparently had some social standing in the community; his father served in the first German Parliament in 1848. After learning the brewer's trade in Germany, Dewes came to Chicago in 1868. Here he was bookkeeper to two different breweries until 1881, when he went back to his homeland with the intention of remaining there. For some reason, in the following year Dewes returned to Chicago and built his own brewery.

The enormous financial success of his business enabled Dewes to buy a large corner lot on Wrightwood Avenue in 1894. Two homes were built on the lot, one for his family, the other for his brother, August. Both homes are in the same style, although the August Dewes house is much smaller.

(Figure 1.)
The Dewes House in 1923. The exterior is virtually unchanged today, but the ornate cast-iron fence at the right is now missing. This fence won a prize at the Columbian Exposition.

For the job, Dewes engaged two architects, Adolph Cudell and Arthur Hercz. Cudell, also from Germany, had come to Chicago immediately after the Great Fire of 1871, no doubt because of the building opportunities which existed here at that time. He quickly became one of the most prominent architects in the city. His most famous commission was the Rush Street home of Cyrus McCormick, begun in 1875 and completed in 1879. Among Cudell's other works (all of which have been destroyed) were a group of houses at Vincennes and 37th known as Aldine Square; a row of houses on South Indiana Avenue, then one of the most fashionable neighborhoods in Chicago; and the Perry Smith House at Huron and Pine Street (now Michigan Avenue).

Hercz was born in Hungary and educated in Vienna and Rome. He came to Chicago in 1892 to participate in the Columbian Exposition and was hired as an architectural draftsman by the firm of Burnham and Root. His main interest seems not to have been architectural construction, however, but interior design and theatrical production. Among Hercz's prodigious accomplishments were the decoration and furnishing of several Chicago hotels, the interior design of some thirty large churches located throughout the United States, and the production of several historical pageants.

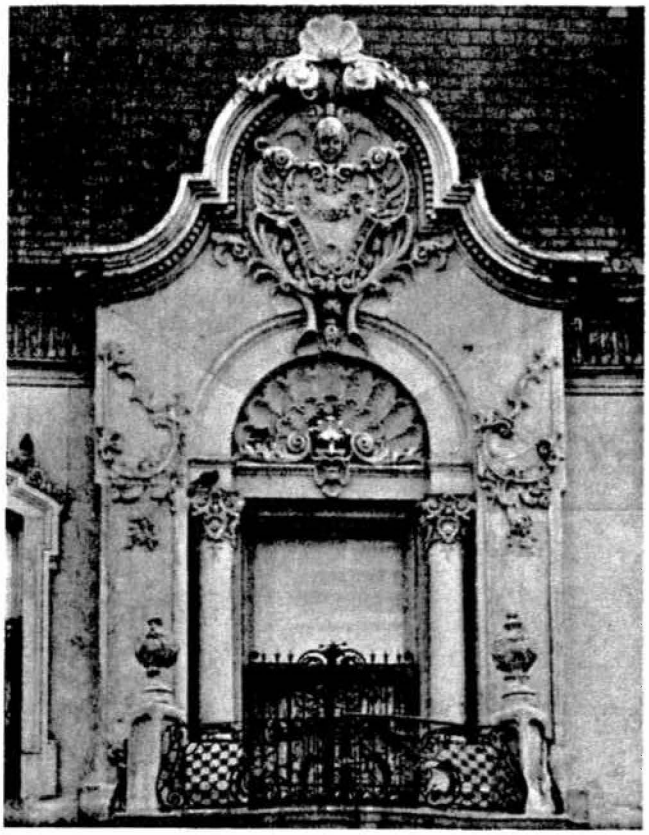
Adolph Cudell also seems to have displayed a great interest in decorative work. He is mentioned in Andreas' *History of Chicago* as a designer and maker of fine cabinets and "high-art furniture and interior finishing." Dewes may well have chosen these two architects purposely for their special artistic and theatrical talents. The lavish display of the interior of his house and the dramatic shifts in mood from room to room would seem to bear this out.

Equally important is the fact that both the architects and the owner were native Europeans. The baroque exterior and the luxurious interior express a European life style that was vividly and nostalgically recalled by all three men.

The style of the Dewes House has often been described as resulting from the influence of the Columbian Exposition, but this is not really the case. The Beaux-Arts style of the Fair pavillions was derived from a style made famous throughout Europe in the 19th century by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. It became popular in this country as a result of the Exposition, but was in fact suited only to large public buildings. Stylistically, it was often a grandiose hodge-podge of elements, combining different kinds of columns, arches, and domes, with statuary jutting from the roofs. By contrast, the architecture of the Dewes House is exuberant but not pompous. The basic cubic structure is enhanced, but not overpowered, by floral and figural motifs. *(Figure 1.)*

Situated at a corner, the Francis Dewes House has three main sides. Two of these face out onto the streets; the third faces the house of August Dewes across a shared lawn. The house is rectangular and measures 45 by 70 feet. The exterior

(Figure 2.)
A current photo of the front of the house, showing the ornate two-story entrance bay with caryatids flanking the front door. Note the angled bay at left.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



(Figure 3.)
Detail showing the upper story of the entrance bay. The carved stone decoration and cast-iron balcony railing are among the handsomest features of the exterior.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

is of Bedford gray limestone, carved in large, smooth blocks. Copper-clad cupolas top each of the two projecting corner bays. The mansard roof is of slate. Although the house gives the impression of having only two stories, the sloping roof studded with small round windows conceals a third story.

The front of the house is on Wrightwood Avenue. *(Figure 2.)* It is totally dominated by the large entrance, which is two stories high and projects out slightly from the building. The front door is approached by a broad flight of stone steps; at the top of these steps are two mythologically-derived stone caryatids, male and female. These support a second-story balcony whose floor forms a canopy over the front door.

The window opening onto this balcony is more lavishly framed than any other single unit of the building. *(Figure 3.)* It is flanked by columns with pseudo-Corinthian capitals and surmounted by a round arch enclosing a scalloped shell and a demon mask. The entire bay is crowned by an ornate baroque pediment which extends up into the roof.

A rectangular, angled bay joins the two street facades at the northeastern corner of the house. *(Figure 4.)* It is one of three projecting bays on the Hampden Court side. Windows on the two street facades are decorated with a variety of sculptured lintels and frames. This lack of unity gives a sense of vitality to the house, and is typical of the spirit of the Baroque.

The main focus of the courtyard facade is a magnificent painted- and leaded-glass window that was executed by a Belgian craftsman. This is the largest single feature on the exterior of the house. It is located between the first and second floors, marking the interior stair landing. A door cut into the window leads from the landing to an outside balcony.

Floral and figural motifs carved in stone decorate the courtyard facade. In addition, there is a large mosaic panel set into the courtyard wall; its tiny colored glass chips form a checkerboard pattern within which a small stained-glass window is set.

The exquisite metal work on all three main facades is one of the most beautiful and impressive features of the Dewes House. Each of the cast-iron balcony and stair railings has the same delicate patterns; they were apparently made as a set. Included in the original set was a large, ornate double-

(Figure 4.)
The northeast corner of the house, showing both street facades. Typically baroque are the variation in window decoration, the mansard roof, and the copper cupolas.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

gated fence that ran along Wrightwood Avenue between the houses of the two Dewes brothers. As seen in early photographs *(Figure 1.)*, it repeats the distinctive patterns of the other ironwork, except that in the fence these patterns are subordinated to a more florid overall composition.

Although almost all the original ironwork remains on the house, the fence unfortunately has been removed. According to rumor, an overzealous patriot is said to have spirited it off one night in the 1940s, to be used as scrap metal for the Second World War. In a recent biography, Arthur Hercz's son states that his father designed this fence for the Winslow Brothers Foundry in Chicago, and that it won three prizes at the World's Columbian Exposition.

The splendid interior of the Dewes House is exceptionally well preserved. The sumptuous, museum-like decor is so extravagant that it is not surprising to find the house referred to as the "Dewes Palace" in a well-known lexicon of German artists. But lavish as the interior is, the rooms are quite small in size. Thus, it is possible to imagine the Dewes House as it was in its day: a manageable private home, occupied only by a family and its servants.

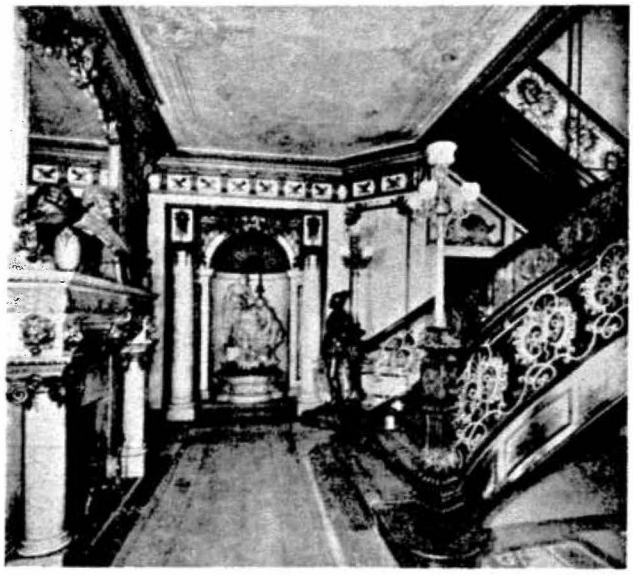
On the first floor are a foyer and four main rooms. The library is to the right of the foyer. The drawing room, music room, and dining room are to the left, connected by large doorways.

The most important feature of the foyer is a fountain-wishing well at the far end, where three life-size figures (a pair of lovers and a cupid) occupy a large niche behind massive columns. *(Figure 5.)* On the left wall, set behind a pair of heavy columns, is an enormous fireplace. It is ornately carved with classical motifs and filigree, and adorned with four handsome lion's heads. Opposite the fireplace is the imposing main stairway that leads to the second floor.

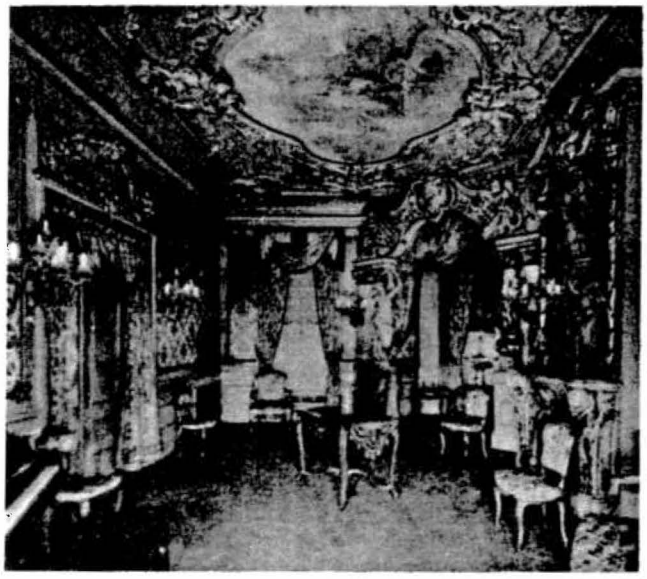
The foyer walls with their delicate gilded moldings, the fireplace, and the wishing well are all of scagliola marble. Scagliola, a material made of plaster and marble chips, was designed to imitate real marble. It was known even in antiquity, although its most popular use was in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. Its revival in the Dewes House is appropriate since the foyer is decorated in the style of the 18th century.

To the right of the foyer is the library. One of the most impressive rooms in the house, it is designed in the kind of pseudo-Gothic style often found in libraries and private studies. Rooms such as this are typically paneled in heavy, dark, carved wood, and often encircled by portraits of famous scholars. Apparently this decor was thought to inspire the kind of profound meditation associated with medieval scholasticism.

The Dewes library is said to have been built in Europe, dismantled, shipped to Chicago, and reassembled in the house. The wood paneling, richly carved with Gothic scrollwork and pointed arches, is of East Indian mahogany. The magnificently-carved fireplace and portrait busts above the dado are of the



(Figure 5.)
The Dewes House foyer, with its monumental stairway and fireplace. The famous lovers' wishing-well alcove can be seen at the back.



(Figure 6.)
The drawing room in all its rococo splendor. Note the elaborate moldings, the brocade curtains, and the original furnishings in this early photo.

same wood. These portraits do not appear to be of scholars; instead they seem to depict religious-mythical characters whose origins can be traced back to a specific series of medieval allegorical figures. Since their original identity has long been forgotten, their function here is purely decorative.

To the left of the foyer are the three connected rooms. The drawing room at the front is French rococo style. *(Figure 6.)* The room was originally filled with elaborate Louis XV furniture, and from every doorway and window hung heavy brocade curtains. With all its furnishings, the effect of the room must have been overwhelming.

Even today, to step into this surprisingly small room is an "event." The furniture is gone, but all the permanent decorative elements remain. Moldings, paneling, and cornices are formed by the undulating contours of rococo. Everything is caught up in a great swirl of movement.

The canvas inset on the ceiling, painted with landscape and figures, has a dreamlike, atmospheric mood typical of the 18th century. A French artist is said to have lived with the family for two years while he painted this panel and others in the house.

The ornate fireplace, topped by a huge mirror, is of Italian marble decorated with gilt moldings. The large alcove formed by the northeast corner bay of the house is entered through an elaborately-molded arch supported by three columns and a carved plaster figure. Wall panels of French brocade were woven in Europe especially for this room. Their pink, blue, and gold colors are still vivid and fresh.

Stepping from the drawing room into the music room, an immediate shift in mood is evident. Here all is quiet elegance and grace. The theme is Louis XVI, with its neoclassic vocabulary of egg-and-dart moldings and geometric shapes. The woodwork of East Indian mahogany and fireplace of Brazilian onyx offer a rich color contrast to the pale blue silk-brocade wall panels.

The dining room is paneled in imported Flemish oak. *(Figure 7:)* The wood was cured for several years; the panels were then built in a local wood-working shop. Two large built-in credenzas are beautifully finished and finely carved. The ceiling, also of oak, is carved in low relief and overlaid with ornamental beams in a geometric design. Two niches resembling small baptismal fonts flank one of the credenzas.

The two doors leading to the kitchen have Flemish-type amber bull's-eye glass insets and stained- and painted-glass insets with heraldic emblems. In a proud tribute to his newly-adopted homeland, Francis Dewes had the mottoes of Chicago and the United States, "I Will" and *E pluribus unum,* inscribed in these panels.

The ornamental hand-wrought iron used throughout the interior of the house is said to have been among that displayed at the Columbian Exposition. It can be seen in the light fixtures, and in the stair railings where it is particularly beautiful. *(Figure 5.)*

The second and third stories continue the Louis XVI neoclassical theme in the painted, molded, and carved decoration of walls and ceilings. The second-story hallway walls are scagliola marble with inset woven wool-and-silk tapestry panels. The bedrooms are paneled in East Indian mahogany.

The ballroom occupies two-thirds of the third floor. Molded plaster and scagliola columns frame the wall panels. Each panel is handpainted with a delicate floral motif and musical instrument. In its day, the ballroom was known as one of the largest and finest in Chicago.

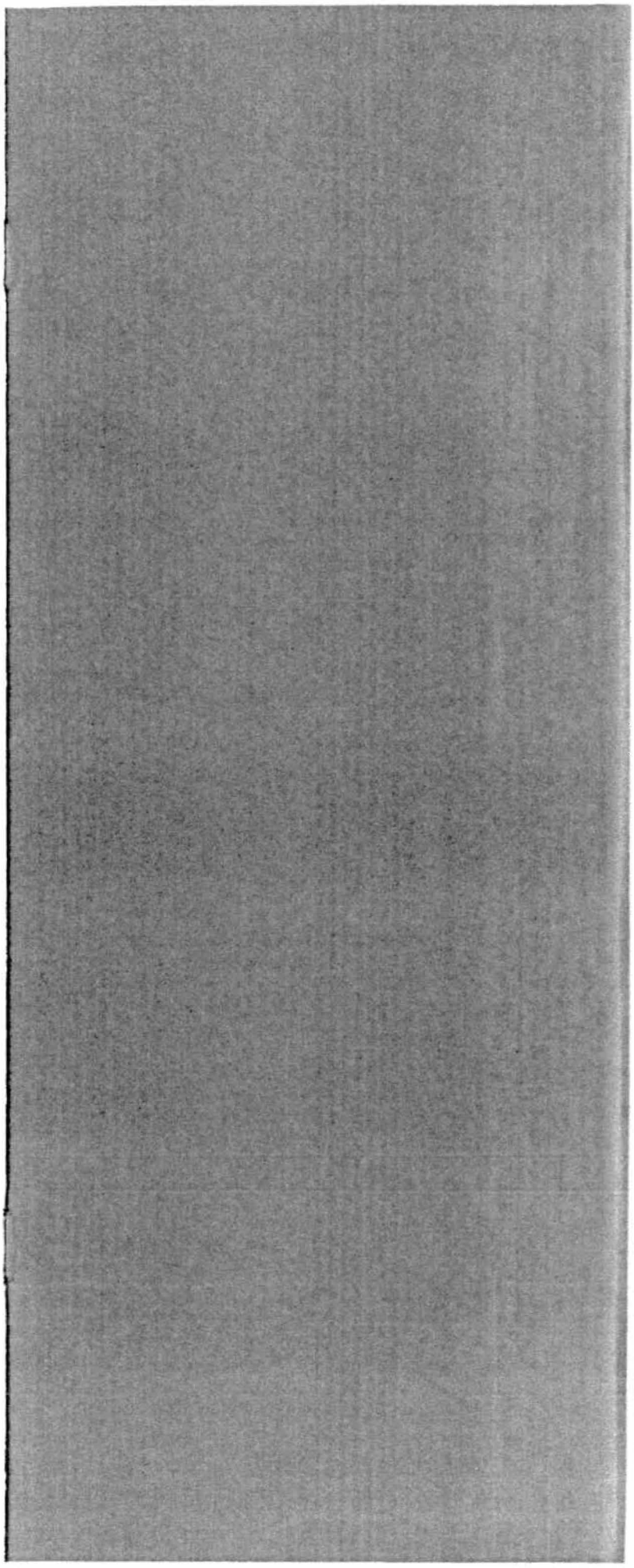
Francis Dewes' house has had only two owners since its construction. When Dewes died in 1921, the mansion was acquired by the Swedish Engineers Society of Chicago. The Society moved early in 1973, having made only a few minor alterations, and leaving the house in quite good repair. Now, although lacking the original furnishings, the house and its decor are not only intact, but in remarkably beautiful condition.

The Dewes House is important in two ways. Architecturally, it represents the last gasp of the baroque revival style in Chicago before the influence of the Prairie School revolutionized private home design.

Historically, the house is important because it is a link with a past that is no longer remembered by most Americans. True, the Dewes House is not practical or functional architecture. It is romantic, impractical, lavish, even outrageous. As such, it is not easily understandable when viewed through pragmatic American eyes.

Stylistically and architecturally, the men who built the Dewes House were looking back, not forward. But it is just this retrospection that makes the building what it is: a "walk-in" document of history.

(Figure 7.)
The dining room, with its handsome carved-wood credenzas, wall paneling, and decorative ceiling "beams." The table and chairs are not original furnishings.



(Cover photo)
One of the two caryatids which flank the entrance to the Dewes House. These unusual statues are the best-known features of the house.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)